

Bilingual education for Ethnic Minority groups in Cambodia

Cambodia, Education, AusAID + other funding sources, began in 2002 – continuing.

Background

CARE launched a program in Ratanakiri, Cambodia in January 2002 to address the education needs of disadvantaged ethnic minority groups through the establishment of community-governed bilingual primary schools.

When the program was established, ethnic minority groups, with their own distinct languages and cultures, constituted 66% of the population of the province. The education indicators for Ratanakiri contrasted starkly with lowland provinces and the situation was at its worst amongst highland communities in the remote areas away from the provincial and district towns. Less than 10% of the population completed primary school. There were large gender disparities in participation, particularly beyond grade 3, with very few highland children moving on to secondary education. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) 32% of ethnic minority villages had no schools at all, and even if there were schools they offered only grades 1 and 2. Typically there were no teachers in these remote schools, as Khmer teachers refused to stay long at such posts. On the occasions when there was a school and a teacher, the teacher and students could not understand each other because of linguistic and cultural barriers. It is therefore not surprising that there were few trained ethnic minority teachers who could bridge the cultural and linguistic divide between students and the school.

Using mother tongue in early years of education

The program aimed to increase the number of indigenous children who could obtain primary education by providing access to culturally relevant instruction in their mother tongue, while transitioning them to the national language of Khmer in grades 1-3. The program has proved successful in significantly raising the educational standards and opportunities of minority children; as well as establishing community support and ownership of local education. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) is scaling up this model more widely in Ratanakiri Province and in five north eastern provinces which also have large ethnic minority populations. CARE continues to support the MoEYS to roll out the program in the other provinces through capacity building, bilingual teacher training, and the provision of bilingual education materials.

CARE's bilingual education model has developed over time through close partnerships with ethnic minority communities and Government and has been continually informed by strong monitoring and evaluation processes. Throughout the project, the three key elements have been: community governed schools; curriculum and resource development for a bilingual and bicultural model of teaching and learning; and, teacher training for locally recruited ethnic minority community members.

Over the past 11 years, the program has broadened to include secondary schools sensitive to the needs of indigenous students and bilingual preschools.

Adapting the curriculum to the students

Throughout Ratanakiri, some 800 students are enrolled in CARE-supported schools, where children are instructed in both their local languages and Khmer. CARE has its own resource production unit that has written and produced more than 80 bilingual textbooks – approved by the Ministry that not only prepare primary school students for secondary education and better livelihood options, but also protect and promote local culture. Moreover, with food security and nutrition being real concerns, many schools have established vegetable gardens that help feed the students and serve as a source of income. Schools have also constructed latrines and educated children about hygiene and water safety.

By building the ability of communities to establish and manage their own schools, as well as select teachers from their own villages, CARE is enabling communities to take ownership of their children's education, using their own languages, for the first time. So far, community commitment and ownership have resulted in high enrolment and low drop-out rates. Based on that success, the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport has accorded CARE-supported community schools full registration.

Work with communities is supported by extensive teacher training and curriculum and material development in different ethnic minority languages. The goal is that this community-based bilingual education program will enable ethnic minority children to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap between their communities and mainstream education.

Supporting transition to secondary school

While supporting children to graduate from primary school was a tremendous achievement, opportunities to advance to secondary education were still greatly limited. To continue their studies through the ninth grade, students had to move to government-run district schools, which could be up to 50 miles from their homes. In response, CARE expanded the program's mandate in 2008 to provide continued support for these students.

In addition to working with secondary schools and teachers to improve the quality of teaching, learning and infrastructure, CARE provides scholarships that allow highly motivated students from the poorest families to attend secondary school. These scholarships provide for students' basic needs to live at a boarding house, including food, uniforms, learning materials and transport home once a month. For students living less than eight kilometres from the school, CARE provides a bicycle, uniforms and learning materials so they can remain at home while attending school. Subsequently, an unprecedented number of indigenous students have enrolled in secondary schools - CARE currently supports approximately 350 ethnic minority students who study at secondary schools. Some students who began in CARE's bilingual grade 1-3 program up to 10 years ago have already graduated from the state teacher training college.

Changing the system

This program's real success lies not just in the increased number of students being educated but in the program's adoption by national education authorities. The Ministry of Education Youth and Sport has already scaled up CARE's bilingual model in other communities in Ratanakiri and is working closely with CARE to scale up this model in three other provinces using guidelines that nearly

completely match CARE's model. In terms of influencing policy change, Cambodia's new Education Law (Article 24) allows for the use of indigenous languages in formal schooling on the condition that the national language is not ignored. And, in early 2013, the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport officially announced a decree formalising the policy for indigenous education. The government program now includes 43 schools serving culturally appropriate education to almost 4,000 indigenous students in north eastern Cambodia. This does not take into account the number of students that already completed their bilingual program.

CARE continues to support the government through teacher training, provision of bilingual education materials and improvements to school infrastructure, and have twice been invited to present on bilingual education at the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization conferences. In Cambodia, the education system has changed to better meet the needs of indigenous populations, thanks to the collective efforts of CARE, UNICEF, the government and communities with the support of AusAID and other donors.